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# Mass Or Master's Medium? A Case Study of Chinese Talk Shows

*This article is based on a research project on the communication model adopted by Chinese television talk shows which, together with other new genres, allegedly reflect progress towards liberalization and diversification of Chinese television in the post-Mao, post-Deng eras. Through an ethnographic observation and textual examination of a range of selected television shows, the author found that although it is making certain changes in the course of the national reform towards a market economy, Chinese television has retained a communication model characterized by the formal qualities inherited from its past and which discourage interaction with the common people and reject their participation. This article contextualizes the author's examinations of the typical communication model by describing a range of general characteristics of Chinese television, especially the contradictions that it has been subjected to during the current socio-economic reforms.*

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This article is concerned with the formal aspect of communication pattern peculiar to talk shows in Chinese television. As the carrier of signals, the form necessarily conditions the content, determining whose signals are transmitted to whom, what effects are produced by the signals, how they are transmitted and how much of them can be actually received. This means that some forms of transmission are less receiver-friendly than others as they alienate the receivers from the communication process. Fiske writes:

(F)orm is just as much a bearer of meaning and culture as is content, and many would argue that, as a bearer of ideology, form is considerably more effective than content. Obviously the definition of the world and the agenda that constitutes the world are important, but it is the form that they are given that produces the point of view from which we look at them, and thus the sense we make of them, and, paradoxically, the sense they make of us. (1987: 23)

For a formal analysis of the communication model of Chinese television, I have selected two sports talk shows: *Zhouri Tiyu Rexian* (*Sunday Sports Hotline - SSH*) and *Ni Wo Tongxing* (*You and I Advance Together- YIAT*). My analyses focuses on SSH and briefly refers to YIAT for supplementary evidence to show the significance of the research findings. The two sports shows were selected for their typicality of sports programming in Chinese television. (CCTV and most provincial/municipal stations have specialized sports channels and other channels also feature a high proportion of sport programs.)

Preliminary observations indicate that these sport talk shows, though of less relevance to socio-political issues than some other genres, adopt a sophisticated version of the communication model which, as a typical one-way process of feeding messages, contains formal characteristics which are prone to minimize participation by the audience. Next, this typical communication model is found to be common to other genres of Chinese television talk shows, such as current affairs, information programs, quiz and variety shows. In fact, the model is being adopted by an increasing number of genres which involve a studio/mock audience who are included to make television seem more relevant to the life of common people.

Before proceeding with the case analysis, let me first characterize the typical communication model adopted by the two shows. In a way, it is an enhanced version of the old propaganda model of one-way flow of information from the source to its destination. The source of information is invariably the Party state or its mouthpiece, ie, television and the destination is the mass audiences. Its enhancement over the past is mainly embodied by its inclusion of studio audiences who are given limited camera exposure and opportunity to offer feedback. But there is no qualitative difference between its constructions of the studio audiences and the home audiences both of whom it conceptualizes as passive receivers. It may aspire to approximate Shannon and Weaver's (1949) model of information flow from the source via the transmitter, then via the receiver to the destination but it does not share the latter's perspective on the subjectivity involved in the encoding and decoding processes of communication. Thus, it seems even more distant from the recent theorization of active, fragmented and empowered audiences.

*Sunday Sports Hotline* (SSH), a 55-minute sports talk show, is regularly screened on *Beijing Television* (BTV) Channel 21 every Sunday from 22:20 to 23:15 p.m. and re-screened on BTV Channel 6 the following Tuesday from 4 to 5 p.m.. *You and I Advance Together* (YIAT), a 30-minute show, is screened every Thursday from 1 to 1:30 p.m. and re-screened the following Saturday from 12 to 12:30

p.m. on BTV Channel 27. The title of the *Sunday Sports Hotline* show literally means an immediate, interactive exchange of sports information between two ends of the hotline. The title *You and I Advance Together* signifies a synchronized activity undertaken equally by the host and the audience.

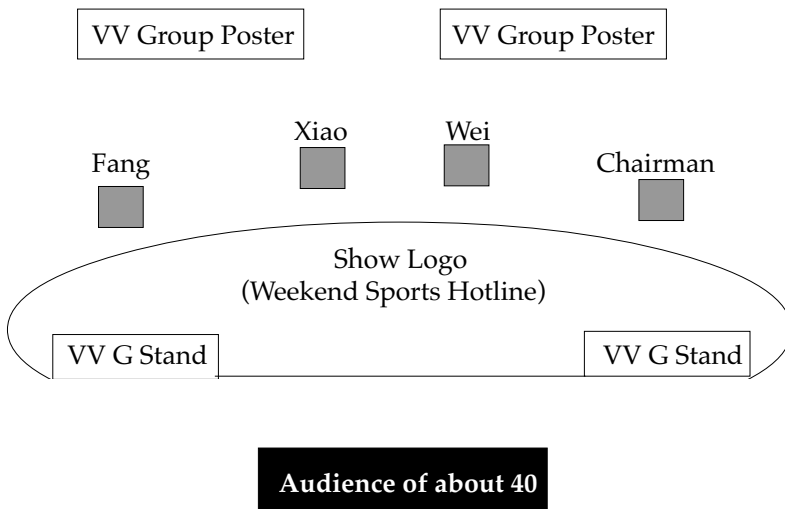
A typical SSH show explores a pre-determined range of topics and is presided over by a chairman, joined by one of two *jiabian* (guest of honor) who are usually well-known officers, experts or champion sports-persons/coaches. They are the main speakers and usually sit behind a crescent podium and speak from behind it. Over some distance on the other side of the podium are members of the studio audience sitting on 4 rows of benches, who presumably occupy the other end of the hotline. Clearly visible behind the speakers hang advertisement posters of a business organization which sponsors the show.

This case study was based on the re-screening of the SSH show from 4 to 5 p.m. on 20 January 1998. The talk is concerned with topics of current sports reform and the preparations of the Chinese national team for the 1998 Winter Olympic Games. On the one end of the hotline are the chairman, a senior BTV reporter Fang Xue-feng and two guests of honor, Wei Di and Xiao Tian. The chairman, male, is a regular host of the program. His colleague Fang Xue-feng, male, middle-aged, is a specialist in sports journalism and, as mentioned in the chairman's initial introduction, made a name with his quality coverage of the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. Wei Di, male, middle-aged, director of the Heavy Sports Administration Department, and Xiao Tian, male, middle-aged, director of the Winter Sports Administration Department, are both high-ranking officials of the China National Sports Commission.

On the other end of the hotline sit scores of employees representing Shunmei Fashion Corporation which is the co-sponsor of the show. The other co-sponsor is VV Group whose product names are printed on the posters behind the four speakers and on the two mini-stands on the both ends of the table. I must mention that this setting of SSH can be compared to that of YIAT except that the latter is presided over by one chairwoman flanked by two guest speakers. To make the case study easier to understand, I include in the next page a graphic representation of the setting of SSH.

A first look at this graphic representation of the SSH show would suggest that the seating of the various participants in the show could potentially facilitate a model of two-way communication between at least two parties. The inclusion of a studio audience is a rather new practice which was never heard of in the Maoist era when broadcast media were merely

### Layout of SSH Studio Setting



transmitters of official messages. The presence of audience could potentially satisfy the requirements of Shannon and Weaver's (1949) communication model where communication is complete only when information is encoded into signals and signals are decoded by a receiver. It would, in this case study, also indicate an awareness by television staff of the need for a second party to be present to complete the communication loop.

Compared to international television format, this model of communication could potentially reach out to the vast population of empirical audience sitting in front of television sets, by semiotically constructing the mock audience, or even the host, as surrogates or representatives of them. In fact, many of the television staff interviewed for this research claim that this communication model is becoming a common practice in the industry, maximizing direct participation by the people in Chinese television.

However, close examination reveals that the communication model of the SSH show is still a closed structure which, theoretically, excludes receivers by rejecting the participation by people watching the show at home. In this model, people involved in the show assume three different roles, those of the chair, the encoder (supplier) of messages and the decoder (receiver, i.e., audience) of messages. The four message encoders in this show are either agents of the state-owned television or high-ranking officials who obviously represent the government. The decoders, a group of staff of a big fashion company and wearing its uniforms,

represent the interest of an advertiser who co-sponsors the show. I would suggest that this relationship between the message encoders and decoders is typically one of government-business alliance.

This communication model is completed by the other role of the chairman -- that of mediator and coordinator. This role is pivotal to the collaborative alliance of television owner and advertisers and place the control firmly into the hands of the television station which is itself a government organization allowed by the current policy to undertake official profiteering activities. This model does not include a person with no government or business affiliations or a neutral agent representing his/her interest. In short, the model facilitates a circulation of messages between the government and the advertisers.

Theoretically, in spite of any goodwill and desire to reach beyond the studio, the official and business messages that are orally and graphically delivered may be only transmitted within the three roles and stop short of reaching an audience sitting in front of the screen.

I find it hard to detect any efforts to hide the business affiliations of the mock audience so that they might appear as representatives of the common people. Even if I concede that the advertiser's representatives could be masked as audiences for a common person to identify with, the disguise would seem to be hardly effective. Not just because they represent the interest of the advertisers rather than the common people, but also because their role as passive audience, rather than active readers of and contributors to the show, is extremely restricted to that of passive listeners. This restriction may serve as a symptom suggesting that the transformation of Chinese society into a market economy is just beginning and that, between the government and business, the former still commands unquestionable power and influence over the latter.

In the so-called hotline talk show program, although members of the audience represent the interest of a co-sponsor of the show, they are given only minimal voice, time and exposure. This corresponds to the embryonic power of the business whose messages, including advertisements and other messages, are only passively transmitted via graphic signs and the chairman's occasional acknowledgments. The business' representatives are present in the show only as a visible but silent reminder of its interest.

Thus, on the one side, there are four articulate, authoritative speakers who are covered by the camera in close-up and medium shots alternatively. Most of the time, the four speakers address questions to each other, turning the show into an exclusive

conversation among themselves as the camera focuses on them. On the other side, the studio audiences sit motionless, speechless and expressionless. The show has two sessions, each of about 27 minutes' speaking time. However, the mock audiences are given only fleeting exposure and are asked to raise only two brief questions at the end of the second session. Both questions, requesting information (one about an individual figure skater and the other about the national team), present the audience as ignorant and wanting of information/instructions.

When the mock audience are shown on the screen, they appear as groups of homogeneous people wearing the same suit, looking at the same direction and displaying the same expressionless demeanor. There is not a single close-up shot of any individual member of the audiences, not even the two audiences who asked questions, as if they were indistinguishable and, therefore, an insignificant whole.

I find that many other Chinese programs, apart from talk shows, tend to package the audiences in the studio only as decorations rather than as equal participants. In the thirty-minute YIAT show, the chairwoman and her two guest speakers are absorbed in their conversation and leave only one minute for several audiences to say, as she literally demands, a few words each. The inclusion of an audience without giving them an actual voice is clearly an ideological practice which Barthes (1973) metaphorically refers to as inoculation. He writes:

One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion. (Barthes, 1973: 150)

The SSH show is obviously aware of both the need for an audience and their subversive potential. So it employs mock audiences which appear as a different source of voice which, presumably, competes with that of the chairperson and his/her guest speakers. But the audience is allowed only a controlled moment of speech (and exposure) which is inserted into the show in such a way as to ensure that its voice completes that of the show.

The hierarchical structure of the SSH show is also responsible for impeding any active, real participation by either the mock audience or the empirical audience of television. The authoritative status of the speakers is maintained by a range of formal strategies including how they address each other, how they are related to each other and to the audience and what responsibilities they are committed to. Firstly, their authoritativeness is noticeably constituted by, among other things, how they address each other and are addressed and how they are

introduced to the audience. The host is addressed as *zhuchiren* (chairman), the other reporter of BTV as *laoshi* (professor or master who has the wisdom and knowledge to teach others), the two guests of honor -- Director. They are seated behind a podium, talking to the audience sitting in straight rows as if they were teachers speaking to pupils in a teacher-centered classroom.

In most Chinese television talk shows, the chairperson who, on behalf of the television station, mediates the interest of the government and the business is usually the big brother/sister of the show. Guest speakers, with all their credentials, seem to be present in order to enhance the chairperson's importance and confirm his/her credibility. I have seen various Chinese television shows which feature a chairperson accompanied by guest speakers who are invited because of his/her professional expertise and prestige. But the chairperson is usually presented as the chief speaker and the guest speakers as supporting staff. Thus the latter are often interpellated by the chairperson as an assistant to provide technical details, to authenticate and substantiate what he/she has said.

The centrality of the *zhuchiren*, chairperson, is often reflected by him sitting in the middle, a symbolic position of importance in most cultures, while the guest speakers are seated on his/her sides. For example, in the YIAT show about the future of Chinese soccer, the chairwoman is flanked by two prestigious senior soccer coaches. This is usually the seating of the SSH shows too, but the particular SSH show chosen for this case study seems to adopt a somewhat irregular seating plan because the two guest speakers sit in the middle while the chairman and his colleague sit on either side. Perhaps it is because the guest speakers, as older, high-ranking officials representing the government, are too important to be seated on the side.

I discern a number of strategies in the seating arrangement to define the guest speakers' location within the hierarchy of the television station. One of the strategies is to match the number of television staff with that of the guest speakers by recruiting Fang Xue-feng, a more senior and prestigious BTV reporter, to co-chair the show. To empower his colleague, the chairman addresses him as *laoshi*, professor, and repeatedly invites attention to his strength and international experiences in sports journalism. Another strategy is to seat the chairman on one end and the senior reporter on the other, thus forming a new linear hierarchical order. This order is based on the importance of their discursive roles in the show, ie., the chairman leads the talk and invites the guest speakers to contribute to it while, wherever necessary, the reporter mediates the talk and rounds it up in support of the chairman and in line with the practice of the television station. This role of the reporter



can be seen as a manipulative one described by Fiske and Hartley (1978) as "clawback", that is, mediating potentially deviant or disruptive events into the dominant discourse of the chairperson.

In many international shows, the chairman is the anchor of the show who decides **who** says **what**, to **whom**, at **what time** and **for how long** in the show. The chairperson of the SSH show has an even bigger role than his international counterparts. In the beginning of the first half hour, he delineates the scope of **what** should be talked about in the show, ie., conditioning the show by announcing the range of topics for the day, ie., preparations of the national team for the 1998 Winter Olympic Games, the 2000 Olympic Games in the areas of winter sports and heavy weight sports, sports reform in the course of transforming China into a market economy and current reform measures planned by the National Sports Commission. He has previously determined **who** speaks to **whom** with his selection of guest speakers and mock audience for the show. But in the course of the first session, he again determines **who** speaks **what** at **what time** by asking the two guest speakers to address specific topics and invites his colleague the senior reporter to help him re-anchor the show by elaborating on the topics.

The second session is again subject to his decisions as to **who** says **what**, to **whom**, at **what time** and for **how long**. Generally, it is conditioned by what has been said in the first session (ie., the official discourse of reforms) and the advertisements between the two sessions (ie., the advertiser's messages) and by the chairman's brief summary of the first session. As members of the audience are clearly meant to be spoken to, they are given a chance by the chairman to raise limited questions only in the specified areas, ie, those areas that have been conditioned by the previous talks. In about 25 minutes, he selects two members of the audience to raise one question each. I previously discussed strategies to contain the power of the guest speakers. These strategies seem to be so effective in the SSH show that none of the questions are directly addressed to a specific guest speaker and, instead, are addressed to the chairman who in turn allocates it to a guest speaker of his choice.

There is a clear manifestation of the paramount discursive power of the chairman on the final stage of the SSH show. Even though "there is little time left, we cannot have any more questions from the audience and have to conclude the program now" (I quote the chairman), he invites each of the two guest speakers to make a summary, ie., to reinforce the official messages which they are supposed to transmit. Last but not least, he invites 'Professor Fang' to conclude the program by commenting on those official messages and on the performance of the SSH show, ie., to anchor the

## Conclusion

messages in a manner required of the show by the television station.

The case study presented in this paper is based on continuous observation of recent developments in Chinese television, on two months of intensive research on Chinese television in early 1998 and on a series of visits to *Chinese Central Television*, and *Beijing Television* and a number of other provincial television stations. It has also been informed by previous studies and theories regarding Chinese television. Among them, Yu (1990) and Huang (1994) have discussed signs of changes towards commercialization, decentralization, diversification of Chinese television in the post-Mao era. Sun (1996) and Shoemith (1998) have tried to re-theorize Chinese television by proposing to study it using a new model, eg., that of entertainment, which is to replace the traditional model of propaganda.

But I have also noted Zhao's (1998) observation that Chinese television, "although packaged in more attractive forms", is nevertheless party propaganda that is designed "to educate the masses through entertaining them" (1998: 43). Furthermore, I have been enlightened by recent international television studies theories, including those of Ang (1990a, b), Morley (1992, 1994) and Fiske (1987), which have shifted the focus of academic attention from television texts to television audiences who are found to be fragmented, selective, conscious and not easily manipulated by propaganda.

In this case study, I am basically concerned with formal structures of two Chinese talk shows which I have analyzed critically and classified as propaganda. The analysis and classification are a result of my making a political and heuristic distinction between Chinese television and Chinese television audiences. From my empirical knowledge and ethnographic studies, I have found Chinese television audiences to be dynamic, heterogeneous and conscious producers of a diverse range of meanings. But their activeness, heterogeneity and consciousness do not automatically mean that Chinese television has transcended the model of propaganda.

In fact, I believe that there is an ever-widening chasm between the preoccupation of official television with propaganda and the apathy, cynicism and disenchantment of the audiences. A recent news story noted that audience ratings of some CCTV's big budget shows have dropped to less than 1% in 1998.<sup>1</sup>

In my scrutiny of the formal characteristics of the two typical sports talk shows, I have tried to show, first of all, how their communication model maintains the hierarchical structure

of Chinese television which centers on the television host. Also known as the chair, the host is constructed as the omnipotent speaker who represents the government-business alliance and who is backed up by guest speakers. The business presence is constructed as a visible but voiceless minor partner in the government-business alliance, whose only role is to provide extra funding resources to facilitate better and more flexible means of transmitting the official message. Then, I discussed how the model fails to engage audiences actively and truly in the communication process. I have argued that the mock audience of the show at best represents the interest of the advertisers and is not meant to be surrogates of the common people. Last but not least, I have analyzed the formal strategies used to preclude the mock audiences from taking part in the communication in any substantial manner even though they are disguised as agents of the home audiences.

In short, the analysis shows that the communication model has retained those defining characteristics which facilitate propaganda and which may be responsible for its increasing alienation from the audiences. In particular, this communication model continues to characterize Chinese television as a master's medium rather than a mass medium. The findings of the case study may contradict some scholars' rethinking of Chinese television as harmless entertainment because they imply that any changes experienced by Chinese television towards liberalization and diversification are far from qualitative or substantial.

## NOTES

1. Guangzhou Ribao (Guangzhou Daily), [www.home.guangzhou.gd.cn/news/gzdl/rb0801/gzdl0605.htm](http://www.home.guangzhou.gd.cn/news/gzdl/rb0801/gzdl0605.htm), 1 August 1998.

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